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A Review of Recent Military Herald Articles on Mountain Warfare

Summary

Soviet attention to the problems of combat in mountainous regions has increased significantly over the past year, but a recent spate of articles in Military Herald does not appear to have broken any new ground in terms of doctrine or the tactics for mountain warfare. The articles make few direct references to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, and in general, suggest a Soviet unwillingness openly to confront the specific nature of that war. Efforts to prepare and train troops for mountain operations are assessed by the Soviets to be inadequate.

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NOTE: This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Soviet Analysis [redacted] Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Theater Forces Division, [redacted]

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Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to review a group of articles which appeared in the monthly journal of the Soviet Ground Forces, Voennyi Vestnik (Military Herald), during 1981-82, and which discussed various aspects of military operations in mountainous terrain. The number of such articles published has increased dramatically over the past year--from an average of 4-6 articles per year during the period 1960 to 1980, to 32 articles in 1982.

2. This paper will first offer general considerations concerning the articles in question and will then discuss some of the significant issues raised (and omitted) by the authors. Finally, conclusions will include an overall assessment of the articles as well as problems which the articles reveal. Synopses of the articles are included in an annex.

General

3. The introduction of Soviet ground and air forces into Afghanistan in December 1979 and subsequent combat operations in that country have clearly forced the Soviet military establishment to focus greater attention on the conduct of operations in mountainous regions. Not only is the terrain in Afghanistan different from that of Central Europe, but the enemy faced by the Soviets and the type of war being waged in the Hindu Kush are essentially different from standard NATO-Warsaw Pact considerations which dominate Soviet (and Western) military thinking. Reflections of this were bound to appear in Soviet military publications as perceptions and appreciations of the situation in Afghanistan became more clear (and more immediate) to Soviet commanders and military writers.

4. The articles reviewed herein, and particularly the tremendous increase in their quantity during the latter half of 1981 and the first half of 1982, do indicate that the Soviet military is trying to come to grips with the war in Afghanistan. One indication of this is the fact that the 1982 thematic plan for Voennyi Vestnik (published in January 1982) stated that one of the primary issues to be addressed throughout 1982 would be the preparation of forces for operations in mountainous regions. This emphasis was underscored in the January 1982 issue with the publication of a special, 7-article section devoted to the conduct of an offensive in the mountains. Finally, one of the articles made reference to a directive from Soviet Minister of Defense Ustinov to improve the preparation of forces for mountain combat. This is clearly a subject whose time has come.

5. Having noted this, however, it must also be admitted that, in general, the articles under consideration do not make specific reference to Afghanistan or to the presence of Soviet forces there. Rather, the articles claim to draw upon combat examples from World War II and experience allegedly gained from exercises in the USSR.

6. There are, however, a few interesting exceptions which do portray Soviet forces "training" in the mountains of Afghanistan. The May 1982 issue featured an article on Soviet airborne forces entitled "From an Afghan Notebook," which depicted airborne units engaged in both combat "training" and "hearts and minds" efforts to assist the Afghan people. The September 1982 issue carried another article on airborne "training" in Afghanistan ("Maneuver in the Mountains: on the Ground in Afghanistan"). The October 1982 issue in a photo section under the caption "On the Ground in Afghanistan," showed a motorized rifle sub-unit in the field with a political officer. This was the only direct reference to the presence of motorized rifle troops in Afghanistan. Finally, the November 1982 issue also contained an article on airborne forces activities under the heading "On the Ground in Afghanistan."

Discussion

7. While most of the articles reflect common themes and concerns, several are particularly significant in their own right. By far the most important article was contributed by Colonel General Yu Maksimov, the commander of the Turkestan Military District (TKMD). Maksimov's piece, "Mountain Preparation of the Forces," headed the January 1982 issue's special section on offensive operations in the mountains and is of significance on at least three counts. The article is the longest (four full pages of text) and Maksimov is the most senior officer to author any of the articles. Finally, as commander of the TKMD, Maksimov has been intimately involved with the Soviet effort in Afghanistan since December 1979; he is certain to be among the most knowledgeable senior officers in the Soviet military on the subject.

8. A central tenet of Maksimov's article, which is supported by other authors as well, is that the basic principles of all arms combat are applicable to operations in mountainous terrain. The Soviet view remains firm that all regular forces can operate successfully in mountain conditions given adequate training and preparation. There is not, in this view, any requirement for the creation of special, non-standard units (e.g., mountain warfare units).

9. The basic form of combat envisaged by Maksimov consists of company and battalion operations (including night operations) combining frontal assault with supporting envelopments and flanking attacks and close coordination with tactical air support. The use of air assault tactics at company and battalion strength is recommended as is the tailoring or task organization of units for particular combat tasks.

10. This "task organization" concept is perhaps the most interesting feature of the tactical discussions reflected in the Voennyi Vestnik articles, and Maksimov's points are echoed by many other authors. This task organization involves the reinforcement of motorized rifle or airborne companies or battalions with tanks, artillery, engineer and other specialized support (e.g., automatic grenade launchers, flamethrowers, etc.) to accomplish a specific mission. Examples of common groupings include: motorized rifle battalion, tank company, artillery battalion, engineer platoon; motorized rifle company, tank platoon, mortar battery, engineer platoon; airborne company, mortar platoon, engineer squad. The extent to which such groupings have been employed in Afghanistan suggests a significant degree of Soviet flexibility, willingness to experiment and determination to adapt the existing force structure to the specific requirements of mountain warfare.

11. Two other main concerns are addressed by Maksimov and shared generally by the other authors. One is a recurring emphasis on the need for initiative on the part of commanders, who are exhorted to display decisiveness and audacity and to avoid the use of stereotyped tactics. Although these considerations are hardly unique to the conduct of mountain operations (and Soviet authors have long conceded their importance), the nature of mountain combat, involving smaller units operating independently, poses the requirement more urgently and at a lower level of command.

12. Closely related to this is the concern over proper preparation of the troops for mountain warfare. This has to do not only with overcoming the technical problems of handling equipment and operating weapons in the mountains, but perhaps more so with physical and especially psychological conditioning (or "hardening") of personnel for this kind of warfare. Maksimov and other authors repeatedly allude to such considerations as the isolation of small units on operation, the ever-present possibility of enemy ambush, and the demanding nature of the terrain in order to stress the requirement for proper training and acclimatization. To assist in this effort, a number of mountain training centers have been established to provide the

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environment in which units can prepare for mountain warfare. Interestingly, none of the articles suggested that these centers had a mission of training individual replacements (for units in Afghanistan); only unit training from company through regimental level was noted.

13. Apart from Maksimov's piece, two other articles were of special interest; both concerned airborne forces "training" in Afghanistan. Besides being among the few articles which explicitly acknowledged the presence of specific Soviet forces in Afghanistan (para 6 above), these articles also contained several insights not commonly noted in the other contributions. "From an Afghan Notebook" in the May issue spotlighted the performance of a company level Party secretary at the most critical point in the "training battle." Although not unusual in itself, this portrayal did emphasize the supplemental role (i.e., supplemental to normal military authority) which the Party plays in maintaining discipline and cohesion in military units. This is a factor which should not be underestimated in the type of war the Soviets are fighting in Afghanistan.

14. The September 1982 article "Maneuver in the Mountains: on the Ground in Afghanistan" was significant as it appeared to reflect the most direct experience from actual combat in Afghanistan (although, as ever, couched in terms of "training"). Emphasis was placed on surprise, initiative of junior commanders, use of diversionary tactics and the necessity for constant and effective reconnaissance. Additionally, the article was notable (and true to the Afghan context) in the "admission" that, even when tactics are well devised and carried out, the enemy sometime manages to escape.

15. The remaining articles, while not as interesting individually, were of some value collectively in providing additional insights into current Soviet thinking on mountain operations. One of the most prominent and common tactical features discussed involves the use of flanking detachments (obkhodiashchii otriad) of company or battalion size to operate against the flanks and rear of enemy positions in conjunction with other forces attacking from the front. These flanking detachments are task organized as discussed previously (para 10 above) and operate either on foot or are air assaulted into position. Both motorized rifle and airborne troops are depicted in the air assault role. The use of such detachments is by no means a new development in Afghanistan, however; for example, the Soviet Military Encyclopedia (vol 5, 1978) discussed the employment of such detachments as a normal feature of combat in the mountains and other difficult terrain.

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16. Engineer support featured prominently in several articles, primarily in the importance of ensuring safe passage of friendly forces along mountain roads. To accomplish this task, movement support detachments are created to clear the roads in advance of the main forces. Again, however, this does not reflect any new development (Soviet Military Encyclopedia, vol 6, 1978).

17. Chemical support emphasized not only radiological and chemical reconnaissance, but also encouraged the extensive use of smoke and flamethrowers in mountain operations. One of the tactics suggested was the use of smoke pots dropped from helicopters.

18. As might be expected, the use of helicopters featured prominently in the articles. The authors envisage helicopters providing especially valuable support for reconnaissance (including chemical reconnaissance), troop carrying and resupply. Interestingly, however, there was little mention of helicopters for close air support, for casualty evacuation, for communications relay or for convoy support--all of which are important roles which the helicopter should be expected to perform.

19. The most conspicuous omission in the articles as a whole was any real discussion concerning close air support (rotary or fixed wing) to the ground forces. Also missing from the discussion to date were such considerations as defense of friendly base areas (e.g., air bases, communications sites, etc); measures for population control; and psychological warfare (apart from the basic "hearts and minds" assistance projects). In a more general sense, there appeared as yet to be a reluctance openly to confront the nature of the war in Afghanistan and to examine how this war differs from mountain operations in the context of some more general war as against Nazi Germany in the Caucasus. While such differences can hardly fail to have escaped the Soviets' notice over the past three years, attention to them is lacking in the Voennyi Vestnik articles. This may well be because the perception of and attention to such differences involves more a matter of strategy than of tactics.

Conclusions

20. Although it is clear that the war in Afghanistan has forced the Soviets to pay greater attention to the problems of warfare in the mountains, the recent spate of articles in Voennyi Vestnik does not appear to have broken any new ground in terms of doctrine or tactics. Basic doctrine continues to hold that all

regular forces are capable of operating effectively in the mountains; specialized formations are not required. Tactically, the articles emphasize well-worn principles of sub-unit operations; attack along multiple directions; use of air assault; employment of flanking detachments; constant reconnaissance; and encouragement of initiative in junior commanders. In the Soviet perception, the key to successful operations in the mountains lies in effective preparation and training of the troops--to include technical, physical and psychological.

21. As is common in the Soviet military press, the Voennyi Vestnik articles reveal a broad range of deficiencies. Perhaps the most basic is that efforts to prepare and train troops for operations in the mountains are assessed as inadequate; most other shortcomings follow from this. A selection of these would include: inadequate maintenance of vehicles; poor conduct of reconnaissance; lack of initiative and employment of stereotyped tactics on the part of commanders; inability to locate and suppress enemy mortars; improper minelaying and mineclearing operations. If there is any common theme underlying the authors' attention to such deficiencies, it is probably a concern over the vulnerability of Soviet forces to ambushes in the mountains, and perhaps a perception among the authors that Soviet forces are taking more casualties than they should be in Afghanistan.

22. A proper sense of perspective is difficult to maintain both for Soviet and Western analysts. The fact that the war in Afghanistan is currently "the only war the Soviets have" tends to inflate its military significance unreasonably, particularly considering the small proportion of the Soviet armed forces and defense budget actually committed to Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the recent Voennyi Vestnik articles do indicate the increased attention the Soviets are devoting to operations in such mountainous climes. The difficulty for the Soviet military establishment will consist in achieving a realistic balance between the requirements of the limited war in Afghanistan and the other more serious and pressing military problems facing the USSR. To a certain extent, it does appear that the Soviets are managing to keep the problems of Afghanistan in perspective: of the 32 articles appearing in 1982, nine were included in the January issue alone, while only 10 articles appeared from June through December. This would suggest that, while the Soviets have focused increased attention on these problems, they do not intend to allow the situation in Afghanistan to dominate Soviet defense planning.

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ANNEX: Synopses of Articles

AUGUST 1981

1. "Actions of a Movement Support Detachment in the Mountains" (p.28): Discusses creation of a strong engineer detachment to insure passage of friendly forces; this unit moves directly behind the recce troops. Recommends use of aerial recce (helicopter) and photography prior to movement of forces on the ground.

2. "Taking Account of Mountain Conditions" (p.31): Chemical support in mountain operations. Defense against weapons of mass destruction including enhanced radiation weapons. Requirements for chemical recce more complex in mountain conditions; use of helicopters for chemical and radiological recce. Importance of individual and unit training in NBC defense because of the likelihood of isolation of small detachments. Encourages use of smoke for masking friendly troops and use of flamethrowers in the assault echelon (i.e., in attacking strong points, key terrain).

3. "On the March and in Battle in the Mountains" (p.34): Maintenance and technical preparation of a motorized rifle battalion for march and offensive operations in the mountains. Repairs and evacuation of damaged equipment. Use of helicopters to bring supplies and spare parts where use of vehicles is not feasible. Formation of a repair-evacuation group; but shortcomings in evacuation of damaged vehicles from "combat" (i.e., training situation portrayed).

4. "Target Recce in the Mountains" (p.44): Difficulties of locating and suppressing enemy mortars and snipers; a particular problem during the march. Importance of observation and taking the enemy under fire first. Admits great inadequacies in this area which must be worked out during the next training year (i.e., 1982-83).

5. "An Artillery Battalion as Part of a Flanking Detachment in the Mountains" (p.66): Such detachments consist of motorized rifle or tank units reinforced with artillery, engineers and other special troops as required. Their goal is to maneuver to the flanks or rear of enemy defensive positions. Recommends attachment of a helicopter with an artillery observer to such a detachment to conduct route recce, locate targets and direct artillery.

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OCTOBER 1981

6. "At Night in the Mountains" (p.31): Operations of airborne forces under these conditions are difficult but possible. One of the most important roles for these forces is seizure of mountain passes in the enemy rear. Portrays an airborne company reinforced with a 120mm mortar battery in this role. Troops fight dismounted with BMD providing fire support. Attention also to defense of mountain passes against heliborne assault.

7. "The Mountains are Easily Understood by the Capable" (p.40): Laments the sad state of preparation and training of company and platoon level officers for operations in the mountains. Discusses organization of classes and exercises at battalion level to provide remedial training.

8. "Radio Communications in the Mountains" (p.83): Principles of radio communication are the same in mountains as elsewhere, but careful attention must be given to the technical peculiarities in this kind of terrain. Mentions that a number of training centers have been established to train personnel (by implication not only signals troops) for mountain operations; these courses still referred to as "experimental."

JANUARY 1982 (Special Issue on Offensive Operations in the Mountains)

9. "Mountain Preparation of Forces" (p.12): The basic principles of all arms combat are applicable to operations in the mountains. The basic features of successful combat in the mountains include sub-unit operations combining frontal assault with supporting envelopments and flanking attacks and close coordination with tactical air. Stresses requirement for initiative, surprise, decisiveness and audacity. Mentions mountain training centers for tactical and physical preparation of troops (training at battalion and regimental level). Use of air assault tactics at company and battalion strength. Emphasis on task organization (example: motorized rifle battalion, tank platoon, artillery battalion, automatic grenade launcher platoon, two squads flamethrowers and engineer detachment). Other tactical considerations include use of night operations, flanking detachments and the importance of constant recce. Emphasis on proper training and acclimatization of troops as leading to an increase in their psychological conditioning (i.e., rendering troops better prepared for isolated operations in the mountains). Mentions an Ustinov directive to improve the preparation of the forces for mountain combat.

10. "A Reinforced Motorized Rifle Battalion Attacks in the Mountains" (p.16): Operations of a motorized rifle battalion reinforced with an artillery battalion, tank company, engineer platoon and chemical defense personnel. Exceptional importance for successful attack placed on the actions of an air assaulted flanking detachment; a motorized rifle company in the battalion second echelon given a secondary "on order" mission to be prepared to act as a flanking detachment. Stresses requirement to secure not only the main objective but adjacent key terrain as well. Attack continues even though communications temporarily disrupted. Importance of timing the commitment of the second echelon properly; advice to commit as late as possible (after seizure of initial objectives).

11. "A Mortar Battery in an Advance Party" (p.21): Value of mortars in mountainous terrain.

12. "For Successful Actions" (p.27): Engineer support in the mountains.

13. "With High Reliability" (p.30): Signal support in the mountains.

14. "Chemical Support in the Mountains" (p.32): Includes discussion on use of smoke to screen movement of forces in the attack, including those forces acting as a flanking detachment. Means of delivery for smoke include dropping of smoke pots from helicopters. Also encourages use of flamethrowers.

15. "In the Mountains and Foothills" (p.37): Airborne battalion assault to destroy a warehouse and temporary airfield. Use of maneuverable parachute.

16. "Air Defense Troops Before and During Battle" (p.44): Air defense of a motorized rifle regiment in the mountains. In a training situation in which the "weather" precluded enemy air attacks, air defense weapons used against ground targets. This is apparently not a favorite pastime of air defense officers.

17. "A US Battalion Defends in the Mountains" (p.89): Based on open source literature from the Western press.

FEBRUARY 1982

18. "A Security Detachment (Zastava) in the Mountains" (p.26): Examines actions of an advance party on the march and in a meeting engagement. Detachment consisted of motorized rifle company reinforced with tank platoon, mortar battery and engineer

platoon. Task force commander was the motorized rifle battalion commander.

19. "A Battalion Captures an Objective in the Mountains" (p.34): Operations of an airborne battalion to destroy nuclear missiles and seize key terrain in the rear of enemy forces in conjunction with frontal assault by other troops. Battalion reinforced with mortar battery, air defense platoon and engineer platoon.

20. "Training Was Conducted in the Mountains" (p.68): Air defense forces participation in a combined arms field training exercise.

21. "Target Practice in the Mountains" (p.75): Planning and conduct of marksmanship training in the Transcaucasus Military District.

22. "Actions of Engineers in Mine Clearing of a Mountain Road" (p.78): Operations of a movement security detachment. Security provided by a motorized rifle platoon and mortar battery.

MARCH 1982 (Special issue on defense at night; however, no articles specifically oriented to operations in the mountains.)

APRIL 1982 (Special issue on breakthrough of anti-tank defense)

23. "A Company Attacks in the Mountains" (p.78): Planning and organization for a company level tactical exercise in the mountains at night. Motorized rifle company reinforced with tank platoon and mortar battery.

24. "Minelaying in the Mountain" (p.84): Notes deficiencies in training which lead to improper laying of mines easily cleared by the enemy. Requirement to mine not only the main path, but alternate routes as well. Recommends use of a "non-standard" explosive "VV" (type of powder produced during WWII) on footpaths every 250-350 meters.

MAY 1982

25. "The Tactical Training Area of a Mountain Training Center" (p.34): Describes a training center in the Central Asian Military District equipped for all arms training, live firing exercises and specialized physical training (e.g., mountaineering). Emphasis on small unit operations and mutual support of units separated from one another. Also emphasis on

employment of flanking detachments, usually operating on foot. Motorized rifle troops operating in an air assault role.

26. "From an Afghan Notebook" (p.38): Shows airborne forces engaged in "hearts and minds" activities (e.g., building roads, providing medical treatment). Also discusses airborne troops participating in tactical "exercises" in Afghanistan, including attack and defense. A company Party secretary portrayed as platoon leader in the most dangerous position during a "training battle." Emphasis on attack of enemy strongpoint from two directions. Also concern for security in the rear of friendly troops.

27. "To Service Military Equipment in the Mountains in an Outstanding Manner" (p.43): Requirements for proper vehicle maintenance and operation of vehicles. Preparation of a motorized rifle battalion with tanks attached for march; march interval between vehicles set at 25-30 meters along dangerous sections of road.

28. "Use of the Bulletin 'Meteosrednii' for Firing in the Mountains" (p.65): Technical article on the use of a meteorological publication with the above title by artillery units.

29. "Tank Firing in the Mountains" (p.79): technical article on tank gunnery.

30. "Artillery Firing in the Mountains" (p.92): Based on open source material from the Western press. Notes the reduced effectiveness of flash and sound ranging and increased role of aerial reconnaissance in the mountains. HE fragmentation noted as the most effective ordnance in these conditions.

JUNE 1982 (Special issue on the summer training cycle)

31. "If the Target is Low-Flying" (p.77): Air defense forces acquisition and identification of low-flying aircraft in the mountains.

JULY 1982

32. "On a Mountain Marchroute" (p.62): BTR driver training on mountain roads.

AUGUST 1982

33. "Exercises in the Mountains" (p.84): Article written by a Bulgarian general on Bulgarian army training in the mountains. Emphasis on thorough planning and preparation; physical conditioning; live fire training; technical preparation; and psychological hardening of personnel.

SEPTEMBER 1982

34. "The March in Mountainous-Taiga Terrain" (p.37): Organization and preparation for march by artillery units in difficult terrain including mountains, taiga and marshy areas.

35. "Maneuver in the Mountains: on the Ground in Afghanistan" (p.44): Discusses "training" by airborne forces in Afghanistan. In one exercise, an airborne company assigned the task to raid and seize an enemy position in a canyon. In another exercise, a company, reinforced with a mortar platoon and an engineer squad tasked to operate as a flanking detachment; emphasis on the capability of airborne forces to function in this role. Stress placed on the requirement for junior commanders to show initiative; the necessity to achieve surprise; to avoid stereotyped tactics; to conduct constant recce. Suggestion to use diversionary tactics (shifting forces from flank to flank across the enemy front) to screen the movement of a flanking detachment to the enemy rear. Also an "admission" that even when tactics are well devised and executed, the enemy sometimes manages to escape.

OCTOBER 1982 (Special issue on offensive operations in built-up areas)

36. "On the Ground in Afghanistan": Photo section showing troops in Afghanistan: parade, public works projects and motorized rifle troops in the field with a political officer.

37. "Fire Control in the Mountains" (p.84): Technical article for air defense forces.

November 1982

38. "On the Ground in Afghanistan: Trial by March" (p. 36): Describes airborne forces preparations and difficulties in conducting a march under mountainous-desert conditions in Afghanistan. Emphasis placed on proper maintenance and correct

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handling of equipment and on an appreciation of climatic factors affecting personnel.

39. "More Complex Conditions--More Stressful Training" (p. 39); Discusses battalion-level training of officers for operations in mountainous conditions. Attention devoted to tactical training (especially developing an understanding of the terrain), physical conditioning, proper and effective use of equipment and psychological "hardening."

December 1982

40. "Airdefensemen on Exercise in the Mountains" (p.74): Air defense sub-units night march and establishment of firing positions in the mountains to repulse enemy air attack (fixed wing and helicopters).

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